**Prince of Denmark – NT performance review – from *A Younger Theatre* website**

*Hamlet* is arguably the most popular play in the world. A prequel was always going to divide opinion. Some may say that writing a prequel is a form of treason. But I can’t see how this interpretation could betray the original; these are characters we’ve grown up with, and, being so familiar to us, it’s not difficult to imagine them as teenagers, acting just like this. Writer Michael Lesslie bravely meets the challenge he was set by the National Theatre, to create a challenging piece of theatre which introduces young people to Shakespeare’s most famous play on a relatable level.

Lesslie’s characters are nostalgic: they don’t feel so different to you or me once you’ve looked past the language and costumes. Calderdale Theatre School’s production is directed bravely by Gillie Kerrod, because it is stripped right back. As a result, the enduring themes of *Hamlet* – love, hate, ambition, willpower – shine through, reflecting what fuels our love affair with Shakespeare. The cast are half in costume on their top halves, and wearing jeans or trousers on the bottom; they have excellent diction with a Yorkshire lilt. Kerrod’s minimalist production and truthful portrayal emphasise that it is the humanity of these characters which binds us to them.

Lesslie’s language captures the authenticity of a Shakespeare play, and yet this challenging performance doesn’t feel like hard work for these young actors. These characters, like us, easily could have snuck out to meet a boy/girlfriend, or felt that familiar sense of antagonism towards a parent – but this doesn’t make *Prince of Denmark* a pubescent play. Lesslie’s questions are grander: do these characters have the power to change their own lives? He focuses upon the enormity of our decisions as young people, and does so insightfully in his treatment of Laertes as the protagonist. Laertes echoes Hamlet’s famous “To be or not to be?” speech as he considers killing Hamlet – now this sort of treason is a pretty big decision for a teenager wouldn’t you say? In an unfair world, where Hamlet has been born into a place he neither wants nor (according to Laertes) deserves, Lesslie creates tension in the possibility of an alternative ending.

Laertes is played confidently by Joseph Finegold and Patrick Costello captures the impassioned nature of Hamlet, whilst the pacing of his lines and gentleness hint at Hamlet’s famously melancholic nature. William Pugh brings the house down as Osric, a perfect picture of the fool; the consistency of his character means that he is always somewhere on stage doing something stupid, to the point where he’s almost delightfully distracting. However, like most of the companies which I’ve seen perform as a part of Connections, the cast needs to learn to project in a giant space such as the Lyttleton, which is obviously difficult and something they’re unused to. Katy Rainford is very sweet as Ophelia, but requires refining and reigning in. As it is, her vocal and physical expressions are accurate but too emphatic. The Player Prince’s speech from *Dido and Aneas* exemplifies the challenging language of Lesslie’s script and stands out as it is powerfully delivered from Joe Cotton, his gestures and timing straight out of classical drama.

The ending of *Prince of Denmark* is thrilling and showcases the boundless energy of young companies – something which makes youth productions like this exciting. Ian Stapleton’s fight direction is complex and physically demanding. A few of the movements – a backflip, a roll – are too cool and contemporary for the period, but they are impressive and lend the production a filmic quality when combined with Tony Clark’s music and the moody blue washes. Kerrod’s direction showcases the intelligence of Lesslie’s script and this cast rise to the challenge, exemplifying that if you treat Shakespeare as naturally as you would any other play, it isn’t difficult.

For those who know *Hamlet*, references are intricately woven into this production which will definitely tickle your funny bone. For those who don’t, this is a gateway into Shakespeare’s world. This makes *Prince of Denmark* one of the most beneficial theatre experiences within the Connections Festival. Magical.

Being ushered into a darkened theatre whilst young actors performed their dress rehearsal, I think I could be forgiven for mistaking these young people for seasoned professionals. The professional way they carried out their rehearsal was impressive, as was their presence on stage.

Watching their interactions with the crew and directors, it would be difficult to distinguish those who worked at the National Theatre full-time from the visitors - the height difference was the only clue! Sitting in on the dress rehearsal was a fascinating experience. As a regular visitor to the National Theatre I have often been left in awe of the seamless productions, so being let ‘behind the scenes’ so to speak, was a real treat. The rehearsals revealed the precision necessary for quality productions - be it the timing of the music, the position of the lighting or the movement of the actors.

The minimalistic staging focused all our attention on the actors’ performances, which were superb. They really got to grips with the anxieties of their teen characters, and astutely interpreted the parental expectations.

Of course, having a great play to work with helps. Michael Lesslie’s Prince of Denmark, a prequel of sorts to one of Shakespeare’s most renowned tragedies, Hamlet, was excellent. Lesslie’s use of iambic prose created a flow of language which had echoes of the great bard’s own flair and wit. If Shakespeare were writing today, I can well imagine him writing in a similar way, albeit with a slightly more modern vocabulary!

Speaking at the Writers’ Platform, Lesslie explained that Prince of Denmark “came about in a slightly unusual way”. His brief was to create a short play specifically for young people that would act as a companion to the National’s production of Hamlet.  He discussed his desire to avoid patronising the young people he was writing for and the difficulty of creating a sense of development in a play of under an hour.

Despite the difficulties, Lesslie created a superb play, which Calderdale Theatre School made their own, complete with Yorkshire accents. A production worthy of the National! I’ve already marked a spot in the diary for next year’s Connections…